

# PROSPECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATORS' PERCEPTION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION BY REFLECTION IN THEIR PRACTICAL STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The study is based on the results of academic research, and focused on the experience reflections of students involved in Special Education. The students reflected on their experience during practical studies at the University. By applying the method of phenomenological hermeneutics, research data revealed that the experience of students acquired in practical activities while performing observational practice and perceiving the knowledge of the studies field in more detail, formed preconditions for reflective learning in the continuation of their University studies. The analysis of student reflections made it possible to distinguish four key topics that revealed the relationship of the contents of students' experiences with their personal and professional qualities in the context of social activities, and students' personal identification with their professional activities, and the arrangement of professional activities focusing on a child's socialization and perceiving his/her "true-life" as well as manifestation tendencies of one's needs.*

**KEYWORDS** Student, Practical Studies, University, Inclusive education & Reflection

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Discourse of higher education studies requires the students to learn and understand what knowledge they have already gained in their own studies. Modern university studies are geared towards the student who is an active participant of the educational (learning) process, i.e., the student who is searching, experimenting and creating one's own theories and understanding (Loyens et al., 2007; Wright, 2011; Anyanwu & Iwuamadi 2015 et al.). Learning and teaching are becoming one integral process in which there is always an opportunity for a student, to perceive the process of learning (being taught) and be responsible for it, and this is possible only through reflective practice. One of the most important goals of higher education is the development of every student's reflection and *learning to learn* skills, accompanied by constant analysis of one's own experience. It is essential to create proper conditions for the reflection, and its key elements are such as individual experience, thinking, emotions, actions and values in the social and political context in which the individual resides. In order to stimulate the student to deeply perceive the field of studies and become a professional specializing in one's own field, it is absolutely necessary to teach him/her to analyse the acquired experience. Scientists (Brockbank & McGill, 2002; Moon, 1999, 2004; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Johns 2004 et al.) emphasize the importance of educating students, who manage to reflect and examine their own practices and evaluate the results they have achieved.

During the process of reflection the students get used to deal with the complexity and challenges, and uncertainties that are characteristic features of the personal and professional development. The concept of continuous personal and professional development includes the processes of self-analysis and self-assessment.

Seibert & Daudelin (1999), analysing the process of professional education, emphasize the fact that the environment and atmosphere of a higher educational institution must provide favourable conditions for the reflection, for its encouragement and development. In fact, students should be able to combine the two perspectives towards learning, i.e., the student's personal attitude and the approach of the professor who is personally engaged in education and helps the student to perceive the essence of what it means to be a reflective learner.

Reflective studies are particularly relevant in the preparation of prospective special educators for Inclusive Education (Blake & Monaco, 2006; Kirch et al., 2007; Welch & James, 2007; Beacham & Rouse, 2011; Causarano, 2011; Włodarczyk, 2015 et al.). This work is specific, as the activities are based on mutual relationship between the participants of the educational process; a lot of problems are encountered in practice, namely: personal objections, inadequate provisions, contradictory feelings and emotions, and the like. A reflecting special educator, as one of the most important participants of the teaching / learning process, determining the humane and stimulating reality of inclusive education for the learner, will be able to integrate one's own experience and theoretical knowledge. This is one of the goals while preparing prospective special teachers for inclusive education. Therefore, one of the purposes preparing future teachers for inclusive special education (for Inclusive Education) should be fostering the capacity to reflect on their own experiences, because reflection is considered the process which conveys educating activities.

Reflection on the information received during the studies opens the way to a comprehensive and deep understanding of the studies field; moreover, it leads to the individually created theory, which is essential for the future practical activity as it serves as the starting point for the new situational understanding (Beck & Kosnik, 2001), and provides material for further reflections on the learning process as well as motivates further studies. Reflective studying can be described as a review process of practical experience that stimulates to describe, analyse and evaluate, and thus it encourages learning from one's own experience, getting to know effectively the field of studies and the context of the prospective professional performance.

**The Aim of the Research** Is to disclose students, future special educators' experiences of perceiving the studied professional area in their practical studies at the higher education institution.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Sample

65 First-Year students of Special Education (university level higher education) were participating in the research. These students (Šiauliai University, Šiauliai City, Lithuania) went to *Observational Practice* placement on the second week of their studies, right after the admission to the University. Goal of this practical placement for them was to develop the skills of self-reflection and to perceive themselves as prospective special educators. Having completed this practice, they returned and started writing a self-reflection account. All necessary conditions to purposefully analyse the experience gained during the practice and linked to the context of prospective professional field were created for the students.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Data Collection

Unstructured written reflection. The students had to write reflections for three months. In addition to that, they reflected on their experience gained during the meetings in which the researcher presented non-direct type questions. This way, the students analysed the experience they had outlived during their practical trainings. Writing the reflections down took them from one to one and a half hours.

### Data Analysis

The phenomenological hermeneutical method. The phenomenological hermeneutic analysis of the text involves phases, which constitute a dialectic movement between the whole and the parts between understanding and explanation (Lindseth, Norberg, 2004): 1) a naive reading is the first interpretation of the text as a whole, which provides direction for further analysis; 2) structural analyses include various examinations of the text, part by part, in order to explain what it says. In this phase different themes have been formulated; 3) comprehensive understanding includes the summarizing and reflecting on the main themes, the themes and sub-themes in relation to the research issue and the context of the study; 4) formulating the results in a phenomenological hermeneutical way means that the results should be presented in everyday language as close to the lived experience as it is possible.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The results were analysed in the context of students' replies to the following questions: Did this observational practice provide you a deeper understanding of the field of studies? What sense did it help you in: personality? activity? organizational? etc.? Please, justify. Give at least one example in context.

Having performed the analysis of the students' reflections on the chosen field of studies, based on the perceptions they had acquired during the practical training, 4 themes and 32 sub-themes were diagnosed and formulated.

The first theme reveals the relationship tendencies between the personality and professional qualities and the activities in the social context which were diagnosed having analysed the reflections of prospective special educators (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Relationship of Personal and Professional Qualities with the Activities in the Social Context**

Sub-Theme 2	Sub-Theme 1	Proposition / Statement
<b>Acquisition of Social Competence</b>	Acquisition of communication skills	After the practice I find it easier to communicate with people, start a conversation. I've learnt to listen to the people ...
<b>Self-Empowerment for Professional Advancement</b>	Self-motivation to further pursue professional knowledge	The practice has caused enthusiasm to study individually, to go deep, to read various literature related to the education of such children ...
<b>Perception of Professional Qualities and Behavioral Ethics</b>	Perception of personality traits and behavioural characteristics of prospective specialists through activity observation	I saw how special educators had to behave, I observed their character. Performing this type of work, I will have to be patient and understanding, I will have to be well aware of all the pupils' problems. However, patience, understanding, and sincerity are most important...

Table 1: Contd.,		
<b>Overestimation of Personal Characteristics in the Perception of the Adequacy of one's Activities</b>	The educator as becoming "the receiver" of the children's both positive and negative approach expressions	The practice allowed me to observe my own character features. I understood, that in this type of work you become like a "sponge" that absorbs everything: both positive and negative sides of these children...
<b>Personal effort as an Assumption of the Indirect Action Results</b>	Emotional and moral support for a child with special needs	...I understood that the most important thing is not the results, but the work and effort. Compliments and pleasant words always make a child try to do better and to concentrate on work ...
<b>Self-Development of Patience</b>	Realizing the "weight" of individual effort and sense through the performed practical activities	When I had to "work" myself, I realized that a lot of effort is required, and this is not an easy job ...
	Patience as precondition for the successful professional activities	I realized that in order to do this kind of work, the subject I am studying now, I have to develop my patience. Patience is absolutely necessary if you want to work in this sphere ...
<b>Awareness of One's Personal Role as an "Assistant" / "Helper" / "Aid Supplier"</b>	Perception of the desire to help children with special needs	Thanks to the practice, I realized that I am eager to help "the little persons" deprived of the quality of life, no matter what age they were or would be ...
<b>Ability "to Step Back" from One's Personal Life</b>	Ability to dissociate from one's own personal problems while being together with children	During the practical training, I got sure that educators must dissociate themselves from their own problems. All their worries and problems should be left at home; when they're with the children they must be gentle and smile...
<b>Comfortableness</b>	Experiencing the feeling of comfort caused by the love for children (and the children's love)	Every morning going to the institution, I felt as if I was going to spend my leisure time there. Most likely because I love little children very much. They loved to communicate, and showed me the toys that belonged to the group. The attention I received from the children made me feel comfortable. I was sure I was expected and welcome there. It was fun to interact with the children ...
<b>Motherly Feelings</b>	Experiencing motherly feelings through the children's trust and gentleness	I felt as if I were a mom. I experienced the children's love and affection, and they trusted me
	Experiencing motherly feelings by having the sense of being needed for the children as well as warm feeling for the children	When spending time with these children, I felt they needed me like a mom, like a mother who was constantly observing them, taking care of them, sometimes pampering them. It was nice, and I enjoyed spending time with them...

When working with children during the practice, the students felt that organization of the activities requires a lot of endeavour. Individual efforts were particularly needed in order to support the children emotionally and morally. The result was less significant and important if compared to the practical activities and efforts that were understood as the very essential driving force in working professionally with special needs children.

Having completed the observational practice the students felt that it had become easier for them to communicate with people, to start a conversation and to listen up to the very end. All of them understood that a teacher working with special educational needs children should have in mind that "patience was absolutely necessary". Therefore, one of the main objectives of their studying was the self-education and development of patience. By observing the professional

special teachers at work, the students identified the most important personal qualities and behavioural traits peculiar to a prospective special educator, such as patience, intelligence and sincerity. These would always be the essential properties and preconditions for a successful professional career of a special educator.

During the practice, the students had a chance to become sure that an educator working with children "... had to dissociate from one's own personal problems." A teacher often becomes the recipient of the children's positive and negative emotions: "... this work makes you become like a" sponge "that absorbs everything, and you feel it very strongly ". Constant sight of children with special educational needs made the students' motivation to help much stronger. They became eager to help ". the little persons deprived of the quality of life, no matter what age they were or would be ...". Students linked their own expectations with the acquisition of the role of a special educator as "an assistant" and "a donor". This happened while analysing the contents of the role and by modelling their own behaviour in the future taking this role.

Every day of practice brought more detailed study and deeper knowledge of the chosen field of studies, encouraged personal motivation for continuous learning and enthusiasm to learn and willingness to take interest in educating children with special needs. All this enabled the students to increase their professional development: "... The practice has caused great enthusiasm to study, to go deeper into the matter. I've started reading a variety of literature associated with special needs education, and I am doing that on my own ".

Reflections of the prospective special educators also showed the tendencies of their self-identification with future professional activities and the special educator's role (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Self-Identification with Professional Activities**

Sub-Theme 2	Sub-Theme 1	Statement (Student's Quote)
<b>Distrust in One's Own Abilities as an Educator</b>	Fear of being unable to understand a child's feelings and experiences	I understood, that I will not always know how to communicate with a child and understand his/her desires I can fail to explain teaching the subject of a lesson; a child may misunderstand what is required from him/her...
<b>Self-Identification with the Chosen Profession</b>	Reflection on the chosen profession	this practice made me wonder whether or not this is the work that I would like to do ... I realized that I want to associate myself with this area ...
<b>Gaining Experience Concerning the Future Work</b>	Gaining experience from the practically working professionals	I learnt about my field from the educators I met during my practice. They told us about the profession and difficulties of the working career, about children and their education, and development, and disorders, and their treatment as well as communication with them...
<b>Perception of the Professional Activities Organization and Methods Application</b>	Individual and group work with children	By doing the practice in special education schools I improved my comprehension of the field I study. I saw how individual and group work was organized for children. I observed the children's activities, performance and their work.

Table 2: Contd.,		
<b>Perception of the need of Responsibility in Professional Performance</b>	Organizational difficulties of the professional activities	I've learnt how to work with children who are suffering from certain disorders (mental or hearing), individually and in groups ...
<b>Teachers' Attentiveness and Empathy in the Process of Education</b>	Emphasis on the capacity to see the children's needs	I've understood that the work requires a large amount of responsibility. However, the activity itself as well as the organizational aspects of work are also very demanding ...
<b>Ability of Carrying out the work is an Extraordinary Duty</b>	Perception of the significance of abilities in dealing with children individually	I've realized that the teacher has not only to teach, but must also see when a child doesn't feel well, when he/she is tired or needs to use the toilet ...
<b>Identification with the Chosen Profession: "Discovery" of Assumptions</b>	Professional help to others is an assumption of personal happiness	I understood, that I will not always know how to communicate with a child and understand his/her desires I can fail to explain teaching the subject of a lesson; a child may misunderstand what is required from him/her...

Hard work, desire, love and professional help for children are the key factors in mobilizing oneself to „fall in love with“ the profession. Students identify themselves with the chosen profession stating that "... this practice made me wonder whether or not this is the work that I would like to do ... I realized that I want to associate myself with this area ...". However, a feeling of distrust is growing up when one starts thinking that it can happen, that it might not always be possible to understand children, and vice versa, sometimes the children might not understand what is required from them.

By observing special educators and teachers they met during the practical training, the students have taken over the knowledge and experience which is necessary to work as a special educator. "... They told us about the profession and difficulties of the working career, about children and their education, and development, and disorders, and their treatment as well as communication with them...". In the course of practice, the students perceived the specificities of professional activities organization and method application. They spent much time observing individual and group work performed with children. This way the knowledge of professional activities organization was being developed focusing on both, the work in groups and the individual work, carried out with special needs children.

Prospective special educators realized that the ability to carry out work is an extraordinary duty and responsibility. Professional skills are needed in order to successfully interact with children individually. The students realized that they "... have to watch every child and they must apply careful approach and adequately different interaction to each of them. Every child requires different focus, therefore, knowledge must be provided in a different way. After all, their disorders and talents are not the same ...". Emphasis is placed on attentiveness and caution when working with children individually. A special teacher has to anticipate possible actions and behaviour of the children he/she is educating. It is important to predict a child's wishes and needs, therefore, empathy was another important feature identified by the students. They noticed its significance by observing professional educators working with the children. When evaluating their future careers, the students have concluded that this position demands a great amount of responsibility, moreover, planning and organization of the activities is also hard work.

The third theme (see Table 3) became apparent having analysed the students' written reflections and the outcomes revealed subtleties of the organization of professional activities.

**Table 3: Organizing Professional Activities**

Sub-Theme 2	Sub-Theme 1	Statement (Student's Quote)
<b>Acquisition of activity organizational skills</b>	Getting to know the children with special needs by teaching them	The practice gave me a chance to get a deeper understanding of the profession I have chosen to study, as I had an opportunity to work as a teacher and deliver lessons to pupils. I also got acquainted with the pupils' activities arranged by the qualified teachers. I was asked to prepare a discussion for the pupils and moderate it myself ...
	Gaining work organizational skills	I've learnt how to organize work and other activities...
<b>Prediction of measures to facilitate children's learning</b>	Perception of the constant demand for a change meeting the needs of children with special educational needs	I saw the type of organizations dealing with children with special needs, I saw the special equipment and thought what changes could be made, what was lacking and prevented from satisfying their special needs, what could be done in order to facilitate their learning and life ...
<b>The organizational link between a teacher's strictness and a child's activities</b>	Assumptions of enabling children to perform tasks	The practice gave me a chance to get acquainted with the principles according to which children's activities were organized. I learnt how to encourage the children to perform tasks meeting the teacher's requirements ...
<b>Time management of educational activity for a child benefit</b>	Perception of the time planning importance in the educational process	I've learnt that if teachers want to prepare a programme to perform it with children, they must start very early; it takes the children a very long time to learn something by heart...
<b>Understanding the relationship between communication and children's needs</b>	Understanding the importance of individual communication with children	It helped me to further understand the specificity of communication with pupils. I've learnt that every child must be treated differently, and an educator should know how to approach each child individually in the right way and to communicate properly...
<b>Managing the activities in order to satisfy a child's needs</b>	Understanding the need for individual activities with children	This practice has given me a lot of benefits. I've seen a lot of new things. I've learnt a lot about the needs of the special children, and about the communication peculiarities. Besides special attention, every child requires individual work ...
	Measure and instrument application to meet the needs of children	Lessons are arranged in such a way that the children could better learn the material which is being taught. These children need visual aids for better understanding, because such children perceive everything in a different way if compared with the normal ones ...

During the practice the students had not only to observe the work performed by the qualified special education teachers, but also became personally involved in the activities. The students, together with the teachers, planned the children's activities creating the tasks to be performed by the children. In the process of planning, it was important for the students to provide all the possible preconditions for enabling the children to carry out various activities successfully. A teacher's qualification and strictness became very important and necessary features peculiar to every special educator as the manifestation of these characteristics guaranteed successful implementation of the planned and prepared tasks. The students also realized that it was important to plan work with children well ahead of time, in order to achieve the desired result: "... I've learnt that if teachers want to prepare a programme to perform it with children, they must start very early; it takes the children a very long time to learn something by heart..."

The prospective special educators pointed out how important it is to be able to select and provide proper teaching aids in order to facilitate children's learning. By observing the existing instruments, which are used working with children, the students realized the demand to have a broader range of instruments and teaching aids. Moreover, some instruments should be changed and the innovations would facilitate the learning process as well as the process of satisfying special needs of children with special educational needs. Individual work with children was perceived by the students as one of the main teaching / learning strategies which are practiced by special educators in dealing with children in the educational process: "...I've learnt that every child must be treated differently, and an educator should know how to approach each child individually in the right way and to communicate properly"; " Besides special attention, every child requires individual work ...". The students emphasized the significance of individual work by assessing the children's special educational needs, their personality characteristics and the specificities of their communication.

The theme Designing professional performance for a child's socialization and perception of one's "true-life" needs reveals the students' lived experience and the perception of the following tendencies concerning children with special educational needs, namely, gaining knowledge and understanding, stimulation, activities planning, correction and granting the support (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Designing Professional Performance for a Child's Socialization and Perception of the True-Life Needs**

Sub-Theme 2	Sub-Theme 1	Statement (Student's Quote)
<b>Knowledge of the children's needs</b>	Need for activities stimulating a child's interests	I've understood what sort of activities the children want, what causes their interest, what their needs and requirements are
<b>Perception of the children's behaviour</b>	Perceiving the behaviour of the disabled children	I saw how the children, with various disabilities, were behaving etc. Some were aggressive, others wanted a warm touch, some of them just didn't care, neither they paid any attention towards you: they were lost in their own world, they didn't notice anything and anyone around themselves
<b>Early correction of disorders helps a child to socialize</b>	Disorder diagnosis and its correction helps a child's adjustment	I realized the importance of a timely notice of a child's speech disorder, and to correct it as fast as possible. It is important that the child wouldn't feel as an outcast or an object of ridicule
<b>Perception of the importance to grant the children emotional support</b>	Understanding the importance of encouraging children	During the practice, I understood that children do not need pity; what they need instead is encouragement, understanding, granting hope
<b>Creating relationship based on trust</b>	Creating an atmosphere of community with the children	I found out how hard it was and how much effort it required to make the children start trusting you
<b>Encouragement of children's curiosity</b>	Orientation of didactic-based educational activities towards a child	I understood that while preparing classwork assignments and making lesson plans, I should have in mind that all the pupils or at least the majority of them would be interested in my doings
<b>Conditions that stimulate the children's talents to unfold</b>	Effect of encouragement towards the self-expression of the disabled children	I was able to closely communicate with the special needs children, and found out a lot about the diseases they were suffering from. I realized that those children were not only creatures incapable of doing anything, vice versa, they could do a lot, you just had to encourage them and to devote some attention to them.



Table 4: Contd.,		
<b>Disclosure of children's individual characteristics through activities</b>	Perception of a child's individual choice to act	I realized, and I was able to assess the children's ability to communicate, play, share things and the like. The play reveals every child's desire either to be in a social environment or the desire to be alone, and play alone
<b>A positive change in personal behaviour with children</b>	Feeling the sense of proximity in relation to children	During the practice I got a little accustomed to the children with one form of disability or another, thus I started to talk to them more closely, and to behave with them otherwise than before the practice
<b>Perception of the importance of comprehensive support for the children</b>	Need for the specialist's support for the disabled children	I started looking at the people with disabilities in an entirely new light. I understood, that pity was less necessary for them, but comprehensive support was of the greatest importance

Being involved in various activities together with the children, the students were given a chance to know the children better and to get acquainted with their personality traits, temperament, character, and they took the chance. Getting to know children's individual characteristics and their individual needs enabled the students to realize both the application and the forethought of the didactic materials necessary for children's motivation and promotion of their interests.

In the course of practice time, the prospective special educators realized that success of a child's socialization is necessary in order to ensure early correction of disorders. It is important to notice the problems in time and "to correct them as fast as possible ..." While carrying out the correction process "it is important that the child wouldn't feel as an outcast or an object of ridicule ..." Students realized that the children with special educational needs can often be ostracized or ridiculed because of their disability, therefore, the main goal of the educational process is to take timely steps, thus ensuring every child's safety and adequate approach to him/her. Helping the children to adapt, emotional support and mutual relationships based on trust are necessary. It is important to make the children feel fully supported and encouraged by giving them hope, "... children do not need pity; what they need instead is encouragement, understanding, granting hope...", "pity is less necessary for them, but comprehensive support is of the greatest importance".

During the practice the students became convinced "...that those children were not only creatures incapable of doing anything, vice versa, they could do a lot, you just had to encourage them and to devote some attention to them ..." As a result, student-trainees changed their attitudes and behaviour communicating with the disabled children, "During the practice I got a little accustomed to the children with one form of disability or another, thus I started to talk to them more closely, and to behave with them otherwise than before the practice ". Deeper penetration into the fields of knowledge of the chosen prospective career enabled the students to perceive the children's expectations, behavioural peculiarities, needs, and to evaluate their own relationship with the children planning future activities and assisting in their socialization.

## CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it can be stated that, through the identification with the chosen profession and reflections on the practice, the prospective special educators were able to gain more detailed knowledge on their field of studies and the specific features of their profession. The need for the self-development of patience and self-evaluation, based on the re-assessment of one's personality traits, is revealed as apparent factors necessary to those who are getting ready to become special educators. The students relate their expectations to mastering their professional roles and modelling their behaviour

in the future while realizing these roles practically. The importance of a practice supervisor (mentor) becomes clear when the student-trainees are identifying themselves with the professional roles and are shaping their images as prospective qualified specialists. The knowledge and experience required to work with the children with special educational needs, were mostly taken over from the working professionals, through discussions and cooperation, and participation in the various activities together. The possibility, active in the course of all practice time, to carry out reflection on themselves as representatives of the chosen profession and on the activities performed by the people qualified in this profession helped the students to perceive themselves as prospective special educators as well as to evaluate their skills and competences.

Student experience gained in the study practices is based on the hidden reflection, when the systems of theoretical knowledge presented while lecturing are associated with the previously gained experience, namely, the experience lived and acquired during the practice, and vice versa. Very often, student practical experience is limited to technical skills applicable only in specific situations. On the other hand, the theoretical knowledge gained at universities, is not linked to practical activities. In conclusion, it can be stated that the demand for integration of the reflection on the practices and the theoretical University studies is increasing.

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